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## Trust and Discourse: A Case of Land-Use Conflict in Alachua County, Florida

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## Trust and Discourse: A Case of Land-Use Conflict in Alachua County, Florida

### Cover Page Footnote

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# Trust and Discourse: A Case of Land-use Conflict in Alachua County, Florida

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## ABSTRACT

Research on natural resources controversies such as land-use conversions has highlighted how stakeholder groups can have significantly different interpretations of the issue. Differing or opposing social values, political interests, and economic concerns play a large part in shaping how groups of people perceive a conflict. In these instances, opposing sides often use discursive frames to communicate their interests and garner support. While previous research has illustrated how frames are deployed in these cases, less is known about the role of trust in the context of frame resonance, especially when the frame deployer is a large corporation. We use the case of a proposed forestland conversion project in North Florida to investigate how lack of trust in powerful institutions can exacerbate natural resource conflicts. We conclude this article by discussing the implications of our findings for future work on natural resource controversies, elite discursive strategies, and official framing cases.

## KEYWORDS

Corporate frames, discursive frames, frames, grassroots environmental movements, natural resource conflict, trust

## INTRODUCTION

Proposed land use conversions can spark significant conflict in affected communities. On one hand, the promise of economic development is very

appealing to rural, low-income, and minority communities. On the other hand, many residents and stakeholder groups are resistant to developing local areas that provide important ecosystem services such as wildlife habitat, recreation, and water and air quality protection. The conflict that emerges can often intensify if stakeholder groups distrust one another, especially in cases where significant power disparities exist between opposing sides (Davenport et al. 2007). Yet, surprisingly, relatively few studies of natural resources conflicts meaningfully center issues of trust and power in their analyses. We argue that, because the conversion of private, forested land has become a significant trend in the U.S., understanding the conflict and resistance that emerges surrounding these issues is critical.

We specifically focus on the case of a community controversy over a proposed forestland conversion project in North Florida. Alachua County, Florida debated a proposal for a development involving several thousand acres of land in the eastern portion of the county. The land was privately held by Plum Creek Timber Company<sup>1</sup> – one of the largest corporate landowners in the United States – and was used for timber production. While the land was zoned for rural/agricultural use, the company proposed to re-zone the land for light industrial, retail, and residential development. The proposal fomented considerable debate and contention in the county, particularly in the surrounding rural, minority, and low-income communities that would be most affected by the development. The proposal caused contention centered on economic, inequity, and environmental themes.

In this article, we use this case to analyze how the debate surrounding the land-use proposal was framed by Plum Creek and how opponents to the plan responded, and we pay particular attention to the power disparities and distrust among stakeholder groups. Specifically, we ask how stakeholder groups with varying levels of power can influence public opinion and debate surrounding controversial natural resource and environmental issues. We also ask how public lack of trust in powerful institutions such as corporations can lead to intractable conflicts, especially surrounding environmental and social issues.

The data for this research were collected over a two-year period and come primarily from in-depth interviews with members of community groups, involved residents, local politicians, and corporate representatives (n=36). We also conducted hours of participant observation from county commission meetings, rallies, and organizational meetings. Finally, we collected archival data including flyers, newspaper coverage,

organizational website materials, and press releases in order to contextualize the timeline of events that unfolded surrounding the controversy and to supplement the data from the interviews. We conclude this article by discussing the implications of our findings for future work on framing, power, and trust in natural resource controversies.

## NATURAL RESOURCE CONFLICTS, POWER, AND STAKEHOLDER TRUST

Community conflicts over environmental issues and natural resource decisions are ubiquitous, and they can intensify as natural resources become privatized or scarce (Jackson and Pradubraj 2004; Nie 2003; Shriver and Kennedy 2005; Schmidt 2002). There are numerous points of contention that drive conflicts between stakeholder groups in natural resource decisions such as land-use. These can include differing and highly interrelated social values, political interests, and economic concerns (Berkes 2009; Davenport et al. 2007; Lewicki, Grey, and Elliot 2003). We know that natural resource conflicts “can occur between competing users of a resource; between those who want to use and those who want to protect a resource; or increasingly, between those who make decisions on resource allocation and use, and stakeholders who want more say in that decision-making” (Jackson and Pradubraj 2004:1-2). However, these conflicts are often more complex than simple power grabs; indeed, the debates surrounding these cases are value-based and can tap into the deeply held beliefs and ethical codes of groups and individuals (Nie 2003).

In the context of environmental conflicts, these differences in perceptions and values are often reflected in how stakeholder groups communicate about their concerns, their goals, and their values. These messages are analyzed as frames, or patterns of communication that work to define the situation and legitimize stakeholder groups' positions and interests (Gray 2004; Lewicki et al. 2003; Shmueli, Elliott, and Kaufmann 2006). In conflicts over natural resources, frames can attract allies to support a cause, direct actions and tactics, and even redefine interpretations of the situation (Gray 2003; Krogman 1996; Shriver and Kennedy 2005). Importantly, frames can help stakeholder groups collectively make sense out of conflicts over environmental or natural resource decision-making processes (Putnam and Wondolleck 2003). For example, in their research regarding a local conflict over water use in Oklahoma, Shriver and Peaden (2009) found that opposing stakeholder groups used frames to either emphasize the commodity value of the water or used frames to highlight the cultural and symbolic significance of the

local water source. Additionally, Nie (2001) argued that frames surrounding a natural resource problem can have a direct impact on government policies and other actions surrounding the issue.

Framing is important not only for justifying or legitimizing a stakeholder group's positions and interests, but also for appealing to potential allies and winning the support of the public (Gunter and Kroll-Smith 2007). In this way, framing can work toward a number of ends. Frames can amplify particular messages and portray stakeholder groups as righteous, but they can also vilify those who oppose their position and call other stakeholder groups' credibility into question (Shriver and Kennedy 2005; Shriver and Peaden 2009). In some cases of framing contests, certain stakeholder groups can deploy moral frames that draw on themes of fairness and justice (Benford 2007; Benford and Snow 2000; Gunter and Kroll-Smith 2007; Selfa 2004). Moral frames have a concurrent effect, where one group or position is framed as fair or ethical and thus their opposition is framed as unjust or dishonorable.

While considerable research has focused on the framing efforts of relatively powerless community groups or grassroots movements, relatively little attention has been paid to frames deployed by elite stakeholder groups such as governments and corporations. This is because corporate meaning work is often interpreted as standard public relations. However, corporate actors can deploy *corporate official frames*, or "strategic responses to significant and imminent threats – to do 'damage control'" (Messer, Adams, and Shriver 2012: 477). These corporate framing strategies are devised to respond to specific threats, drive impression management efforts, and protect corporate legitimacy. In framing disputes with local community groups, corporations have access to more financial, social, and political resources to deploy these campaigns in the wake of conflicts or controversies. In addition, some local groups can make claims that are concurrent or influential on frames utilized by corporate entities. In this way, local groups can work in tandem with corporate framing efforts to negate oppositional frames from grassroots organizations (see for example Adams et al. 2019). Previous research has established how powerful stakeholder groups can heavily skew the pervasiveness and resonance of position framing, which can directly influence outcomes in natural resource decision-making. In other words, power relations and inequities play a large part in determining whose messages are heard and believed (Hudgins and Poole 2014; Stern and Coleman 2015). However, what is less known is how power disparities can work to disadvantage the discursive efforts of large

institutions such as corporations because of an intrinsic distrust in powerful entities (Adams, Highhouse, and Zickar 2010).

Extant research has underscored how important trust is in both the development and the potential resolution of conflict, specifically in the context of stakeholder participation and interaction (Focht and Trachtenberg 2005; Petts 2008; Sabatier et al. 2005). In essence, when certain groups lack public trust, their claims and messages are far less likely to resonate with other key stakeholders. Research on frame resonance has highlighted how claims and messages must appear legitimate, verifiable, and consistent with previously accepted claims and messages in order to be accepted by target audiences (Koopmans and Duyvendak 1995; Messer et al. 2012; Noakes 2000; Snow and Benford 1992). However, frames are not necessarily taken at face value. If stakeholder groups suspect that particular organizations have ulterior motives or are not playing fair, the organizations' frames and claims will be met with skepticism from the start. For example, organizational research found that people can be distrustful of corporations in general, rather than distrustful of one particular corporation (Adams et al. 2010). This type of skepticism can be particularly evident when debates occur over technical and scientific claims made by powerful institutions and organizations such as government agencies and corporations (Gutrich et al. 2005).

In addition, we know that corporate official framing campaigns can go beyond conventional public relations tactics by utilizing creative approaches to gain community support (Messer et al. 2012). For example, public relations firms are contracted through an organizational or corporate firm to manage client's political and social campaigns in order to mobilize public participation, which involves the strategic targeting of stakeholders (Walker 2014; McDonnell, King, and Soule 2015). These organizations help mediate for their clients and respond to challenges that arise in the sociopolitical environments. An often-used tactic for public relations firms is to target opinion leaders in the community or to mobilize minority groups. In addition, governments and corporations can engage in public participation campaigns such as round tables and "living room" meetings in order to build relationships with key community members (Webler and Tuler 2001; Halvorsen 2006). This tactic is particularly useful when a company finds themselves on the negative end of public debate (Walker 2009, 2014). However, certain citizens are less likely to participate in public forums when they believe the proposal is risky or see those who are implementing the proposal as untrustworthy (Halvorsen 2006). This is particularly true in cases where citizens distrust the claims

of any large, powerful corporation based on a generalized belief that claims are made based on capitalistic drive and corporate greed (Adams et al. 2010). Thus, in the case of natural resource conflicts, it is not only the context in which stakeholder groups deploy frames, claims, and counterclaims that can affect how conflicts play out (see Noakes and Johnston 2005). We argue that intrinsic power disparities among stakeholder groups can foment suspicion and skepticism, which in turn affects how corporate official frames resonate among public.

Framing and other discursive strategies are often at the center of environmental controversies, yet power – and more specifically distrust of the powerful – is often overlooked as an explanatory factor in frame resonance and frame failure (Messer et al. 2012). The media is replete with stories about corporate malfeasance and wrong doing, which can in turn affect how individuals interpret corporations' intentions in general (Bellingham 2003). In addition, Adams, Highhouse, and Zickar (2010) established that individuals' worldviews regarding justice, human nature, politics, and ethics can significantly explain their levels of trust in corporate messaging and intentions. Even more compounding, research has shown that corporations are highly aware of the importance of establishing, building, and maintaining trust among stakeholders, especially in the wake of controversies or accusations of wrongdoing (Roscigno 2011). They can do this in a number of ways including reinforcing their own legitimacy, denigrating or vilifying challengers, and even attempting to neutralize opposition to the agendas of those in power (Shriver, Adams, and Cable 2012; Roscigno 2011; Roscigno et al. 2015; Walker 2009, 2014). Public awareness – or even just suspicion of these types of tactics – can radically alter the discursive landscape in which natural resource controversies occur when one side is a powerful corporation.

Given the complex landscape of power differentials, trust (and lack thereof), and competing environmental values, natural resource conflicts such as debates over land use conversions can present particular obstacles to collaborative approaches or conflict resolution. We use the case of a land-use controversy in Alachua County, Florida to investigate how corporations can direct discourse surrounding these cases in particular ways, and how lack of trust in elite claims and underlying motivations can impede frame resonance in communities.



## TIMBER CORPORATIONS AND LAND-USE CONTROVERSY IN NORTH CENTRAL FLORIDA

One of the most prominent issues for rural areas in the U.S. is the conversion of forested land to developed retail and residential areas. Currently, over half of U.S. forestland is privately held, and most of those acres are owned and controlled by large, corporate real estate investment trusts (REITs) (Zhang, Butler, and Nagubadi 2012); Weyerhaeuser alone controls more than 13 million acres of timberlands in the U.S. (D'Amato et al. 2017). REITs typically manage forestland for income from timber and hunting leases with an ultimate goal of re-zoning and selling the land to developers once it significantly appreciates. When REITs propose land-use conversions, it can spark significant conflict in surrounding communities, and this issue is of particular concern for heavily forested and rapidly developing states like Florida whose forested land is mostly privately held (Florida Forest Service 2010). It is worth noting that Peninsular Florida is projected to lose more forested land to development than any other forested land in the south (Wear et al. 2013).

This article focuses on a community controversy over a REIT forestland conversion project in Alachua County in North Florida. Alachua County is a predominantly rural county with only a few urban areas, including the City of Gainesville. The majority of the wealth in the county is concentrated in these urban areas surrounding the University of Florida in Gainesville. Indeed, Gainesville is in the top ten of cities with the highest income inequality in the United States (Sainato 2015). In 2011, Alachua County, Florida considered a proposal called Envision Alachua, which proposed the re-zoning of a significant portion of land from rural/agricultural use (utilized for timber production) to Employment-Oriented Mixed Use (EOMU), allowing for light industrial, retail, and residential development. Importantly the communities surrounding this area are primarily rural and low-income, and in the eastern portion of Gainesville, most of the residents are African-American (Bureau of Economic and Business Research 2018).

The land is owned by Plum Creek Timber Co., a REIT that proposed to develop the land holdings into an intensive and significant mixed-use development. The proposal fomented considerable debate and contention in the county, particularly in the rural, minority, and low-income communities that would be most affected by the development. In order to solicit community input regarding the development plan, Plum Creek established the Envision Alachua Community Task Force which was comprised of community leaders, representatives from infrastructure

providers in the area such as utilities, leaders of environmental groups, and representatives from the University of Florida and Santa Fe College. The corporation held workshops and educational forums over the course of two years. In that time, more than 2,000 Alachua County residents were involved in the development of the plan. In December 2013, Plum Creek submitted the Envision Alachua development proposal to the Alachua County Commission. After significant public debate and outcry, the Envision Alachua plan was voted down by the county commission on June 24, 2014. Addressing concerns from the county commission regarding more conservation lands and wetland protection, Plum Creek revised the application and resubmitted it to the county in 2015. At the time, the application was voted down and the plan remains unclear going forward at this point.

## DATA AND ANALYSIS

A qualitative case study approach was used for this project. This approach allowed us to intensely explore the complex relationships, social phenomena, and community dynamics surrounding this controversy (Yin 2008; Baxter and Jack 2008). Case studies are a useful approach in investigating how and why local conflicts play out (Baxter and Jack 2008), and thus provide a method that is well suited for our goal to investigate how corporations can direct discourse surrounding these cases in particular ways, and how lack of trust in elite claims and underlying motivations can impede frame resonance in communities. Additionally, the case is bounded by the context of the setting and the researchers cannot alter the behavior of the participants (Yin 2008).

The data for this research were collected in 2015 and 2016 and come primarily from in-depth interviews with members of community groups in Alachua County, Florida, involved residents, local politicians, and representatives from Plum Creek. We conducted numerous hours of participant observation from county commission meetings. Additional archival data were collected and used to understand the timeline of events surrounding the land controversy and to supplement the data from the interviews. The local newspaper, the *Gainesville Sun*, was the main source of archival data, along with posts from the Chamber of Commerce. Relevant documents generated throughout the controversy were also collected and analyzed. These included organizational website materials, press releases, pamphlets, and brochures from the organizations and the corporate task force. All data collection methods were approved by the University of Florida's Institutional Review Board.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 36 participants, including local activists, residents, city and county commissioners, and corporate officials. Participants ranged in age, gender, and race, although most were over forty years old, fairly evenly split between males and females, and the majority were white, although active African-American leaders in the community also took part in the study. Participants were identified through the organizations' official websites, social media pages, and news accounts of community meetings. The interview guide included open-ended questions, which allowed respondents to describe their background, experiences, and perspective on the Envision Alachua project and conflict surrounding it. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours. A snowball sampling technique was used to identify additional participants. We attended multiple Alachua County commission meetings and city districts meetings in Gainesville and Hawthorne in 2015 and 2016 regarding the Envision Alachua development proposal. The meetings involved commentary from government officials, commissioners, and the public. The comments from these meetings were used to supplement the themes that emerged from the interviews.

The data from the interviews were coded using a line-by-line approach, starting with open coding to identify major themes in the data. We then moved to an axial coding approach, which allowed us to combine, expand, and refine the salient codes that emerged from the interviews. The data were independently coded by two coders to ensure intercoder reliability. In instances where there was a disagreement on the coding, the coders discussed the issue until agreement was reached (Hodson 1999). Interviews were organized into two groups based on whether the participants supported or opposed the Envision Alachua proposal. None of the participants described themselves as ambivalent about the proposed development. The authors looked for language regarding perceptions of Plum Creek including trust, social justice in Alachua County, environmental concerns, and framing strategies used by Plum Creek.

**OFFICIAL FRAMES, TRUST, AND NATURAL RESOURCE CONFLICT**  
Our analysis showed that Plum Creek developed a two-prong framing campaign that centered on social inequity and environmental stewardship. The purpose of these discursive efforts was to garner support for the Envision Alachua project, as well as bolster the corporation's legitimacy in Alachua County. We found that these frames resonated among supporters of the plan to develop the land, and were reiterated in discursive support

for the corporation. However, there was also widespread distrust of Plum Creek's intentions and claims among the public and particular stakeholder groups involved in the controversy. Below, we detail the frames that characterized the promotion of this plan, and the reasons why public lack of trust in corporate official frames was a significant barrier to those frames resonating with Plum Creek's opponents.

### *Social Equality Frame*

Alachua County, Florida is characterized by persistent patterns of segregation and noticeable social inequality between the east and the west portions of the county (Knowles and Jarrett 2017; Maner 2019). This pattern is also reflected in Gainesville, the county seat. The eastern part of the county has historically been economically depressed and neglected in terms of infrastructure and economic development, when compared to the western side of the county. In addition, communities on the east side of the county are primarily low-income and minority, and many of them are rural. A report conducted by the University of Florida's Program for Resource Efficient Communities shows that black households in Alachua County earn 34 percent less than the local baseline, whereas white households earn 42 percent more (Knowles and Jarrett 2017: 38). As a result, much of the discourse surrounding the Envision Alachua plan capitalized on the already existing concerns about social inequity and fairness. Our analysis revealed that the concept of "moral frames" – or frames that are oriented around fairness and justice (Benford 2007; Gunter and Kroll-Smith 2007; Selfa 2004) – played a large part in the discourse surrounding the social inequity in the county.

Promotional materials and interviews with Plum Creek representatives often emphasized how their proposal would alleviate the persistent inequity between the east and west sides of the county. Website content highlighted the tens of thousands of jobs the development would bring to the community. These sentiments were also reflected in interviews with Plum Creek representatives who argued that corporate representatives saw it as their duty to do something about the social injustices between east and west, as illustrated in this quote:

We do have a responsibility to do something about it [the inequality issues], and what is that? I think that's the struggle going on. It's about are we going to attract more jobs, and therefore grow faster than we thought we were going to grow. And will that have a negative or positive effect? ... We are jobs on a small portion of land, but the small portion is

big enough to bring in significant employers that actually deal with several needs. UF's need as well as the need for the community that's been left behind [the east side of the county]. Then they're located in the area that is the greatest need but this massive environmental protection part gets over looked because they're so focused on stopping jobs.

Residents of the east side of the county also drew upon this frame to express their frustration about the consistent neglect of east side residents in terms of infrastructure, job opportunities, and development. There is a noted difference as one crosses Main Street in Gainesville from the west (where the university and other related institutions are) to the east side. A former member of the Gainesville Chamber of Commerce noted this apparent difference:

If you were to right now, you got on University Avenue, you're downtown now, you start riding this way [east] ... if you keep looking on both sides of the street, you're going to see a deterioration begins to increase the further you go east. You'll see a difference. It's so obvious!

This neglect of the east side of town and the county was often recounted by participants who supported Plum Creek's plan for developing the east areas. A proponent for the plan who worked with the corporation to promote the Envision Alachua plan described the frustration this way:

Every day we see development on the west side but when we want to develop on the east side, what do you get? You get a lot of opposition, and that's not right. That's not fair. That's not morally right to me. It's a moral issue because again I was raised here and the conditions have not changed since I grew up as a kid.

The frame of social inequity was often invoked by proponents of the plan in expressing a deep feeling of unfairness in the opportunities available to east side and west side residents. One respondent explained their support for the plan using this frame:

They have a right to economic development and growth in their area. They have a right to that as a city. For big Gainesville to want to beat up on them and try to stop it is not fair. It's not fair! Those folks have a right to want to live and enjoy life like anyone else. And the county is considering stopping it.

One of the main arguments for the disparity in the county was a fundamental lack of businesses and services on the east side.

Communities experiencing economic oppression and inequity often support questionable corporations that may pose environmental harm in order for the promise of economic prosperity (Bailey, Faupel, and Alley 1995). Our findings showed that a significant focus of the framing of the Envision Alachua plan promised considerable economic development and improvement in the area, which would primarily benefit residents in these low-income areas. Whereas the west side of the county is replete with ongoing development, the east side still has food deserts and few financial businesses such as banks. As this respondent notes, this results in limited wages and resources for residents:

But I think the people who live in the east [part of the] county, no matter what their race is, are economically disadvantaged because of the proximity of jobs and stores you know.

Many proponents for the plan pointed to the desperation of the residents on the east side of the county and highlighted the severity of the inequity. One respondent who promoted the plan at public meetings recalled his interaction with a long-time east side resident, saying:

One lady told me, we were having a meeting and she said” “[Name], can we just get a Wendy’s?” She saw that as economic development. Bless her heart, y’all. That was economic development to her. She just wanted something there. It is just terrible over there.

To underscore the moral frame of social inequity, proponents of the plan often invoked the issues of race and racism as a fulcrum for their arguments. Notably, this discourse was pushed forward when the then-president of the Alachua County National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) wrote a piece for the local newspaper to argue that economic development opportunities were being denied to the minority communities of Alachua County unjustly, as noted in this excerpt:

Today in Alachua County, the specter of a new variant of environmental racism is raising its ugly head and threatening to destroy the first real prospect in more than half a century of substantial economic development in and near minority and low-income communities of eastern Alachua County: the proposed Plum Creek project. This new form of environmental racism — or “reverse environmental racism” — is partially enabled by well-funded, and often external, interest groups (Foxy 2014).

The persistent patterns of segregation that still plague the south are very apparent in Alachua County. Even though race was often a central part of the discussion, an African-American respondent who grew up in Gainesville explained how this was an extremely emotional and personal issue for many people involved in the conflict. He described his own perspective on the discourse this way:

It just brings out so many emotions in me when we start doing this [talking about racial inequality in the county] because it takes me back to a time when folks who looked like me had no say. Not a little say, but no say ... First of all, we had to dress up to come downtown, secondly you got your rules before you left home. You had to look down, you couldn't look up ... But, back then it was just different down here.

Thus, our findings showed that the social inequity frame worked as a moral frame and resonated with supporters because it drew on extant feelings of frustration, unfairness, and racial inequity in the county.

Although few participants disagreed with the claims regarding inequity and unfairness in the discussion regarding the disparities between the east and west sides of the county, many distrusted the motives of the corporation and suspected that the framing of the issue was strategic. Opponents of the plan did not trust that this frame was a genuine representation of the corporation's true motivations for pushing the Envision Alachua plan forward. These participants argued that Plum Creek exploited the existing inequity in the county to promote a plan that would be lucrative for the corporation, and of race-baiting to preemptively vilify activists against the plan. Specifically, residents opposed to the plan argued that Plum Creek purposefully oriented the discourse around race to amplify the support for Envision Alachua, as noted by this environmental activist:

They [Plum Creek] made a racial split between environmentalists and some black people on this issue. And I really, really resent that. And the fact of the matter is of course we have poverty. Every town has poverty ... They sold a false bill to these people and they made these people promises they can't keep. And we consider that to be wrong. It's morally wrong what they did to our community!

Participants thought that the issues surrounding social inequity – specifically economics and race – were strategically used as a corporate official frame for the discourse because it obstructed the opposition's

arguments. One activist illustrated this frustration, saying: “I mean it’s hard to comment publicly about [the Envision Alachua plan] when race is involved and money is involved, because then ‘Oh, you’re a racist.’” Some respondents argued that the social inequity frame created a situation where opposition to the plan became synonymous with racism. An activist explained:

And reverse racism is where you stop good things from going to where the black people live. And they attacked us. That really made me angry. It makes you look guilty if you say, “I’m not a racist, I have black friends, you know!” ... how do you deal with that kind of thing so we tried to deal with it with the facts.

Other respondents were more suspicious of direct manipulation. For example, one respondent suggested that the letter to the editor from the Alachua County NAACP president was actually orchestrated by the corporation itself:

So that whole statement about “This is reverse environmental racism” plays right into the narrative of, “This is a black thing versus a white thing.” This is a, “You don’t want to lift us up, you want to keep us down.” And the reality is, Plum Creek has no desire to develop that land. They’re going to sell it to someone to develop that land. They just have the desire to increase the value of their land and entitlements. So, I reject that argument, I reject the whole premise of that article, I don’t think she wrote it. In fact, I’ve been told by many other folks that Plum Creek wrote it.

This lack of trust is exemplified in opponent’s perceptions of the process by which Plum Creek developed the Envision Alachua plan. Respondents who opposed the plan argued that the corporation strategically developed an agenda to involve key community members and get them on the pro-development side of the debate. Many suggested that in the process of putting together the task forces and community forums, Plum Creek lost the trust of residents not involved in the process. One resident argued that the corporation sought out residents who would be sympathetic to their frame of social equity in the county as justification for their development proposal:

So now we’re looking at Plum Creek who has lots of money to spend to court people. These nice dinners that they provide for everybody – this opportunity for us to come in and work together, present a bigger project. ... The point is



by the time we've gotten to that point; we don't trust them at all. We just don't trust them at all to do what they say they're gonna do.

The theme of distrust was pervasive through many of the opponents' public comments, writing, and in their interviews. Significantly, opponents pointed to the fact that Plum Creek is an extremely large corporation as evidence that they could not possibly be invested in community or social equity. Rather, the corporation was concerned only about a profitable bottom line and used framing and other strategies to achieve their financial goals. For example, participants who opposed the plan expressed their belief that Plum Creek was simply trying to manipulate the community using the social equity frame to get to their surreptitious goal of re-zoning and selling their land.

### *Environmental Stewardship*

In addition to the social equality frame, corporate official framing also centered on environmental stewardship. Alachua County is known for its dedication to environmental conservation. In 2000, the county got more than 60 percent of the vote for a referendum to raise property taxes to fund the Alachua County Forever land acquisition program. This program aims to protect water quality and wildlife habitats, and provide natural areas for recreation to the community (Plum Creek 2015). As a result, environmental concern was a key issue in the land-use conflict in the county. Plum Creek addressed environmental concerns including holding land in conservation, sustainable development, water issues, wetland destruction and mitigation, and wildlife protections. One of the key arguments for the plan was that they were going to keep most of their land in conservation in the form of silvicultural operation, or the production of timber products. A corporate representative explained their approach to addressing the community's concerns about the environment in the eastern portion of the county:

We are all for better communities. We are for saving the environment and conserving the land that needs to be conserved. Preserving the places that keep the turtles and all of that. They've given us trips out there. Anyone who wants to go, they've taken them. Twelve percent [of the land] is all that is actually going to be developed. Eighty-some percent is just conservation or preservation. I don't know what the big thing is about here.

In Florida, water usage and water quality are major issues of concern, especially since the state's economy is predicated on constant growth and development, and new residents move to the state by the thousands each year. Much of the environmental framing in this conflict centered on water-related issues. Many of the proponents of the plan claimed that the water usage, water quality, and water runoff due to the clay-based soil on the land were accounted for in the Envision Alachua plan. One member of the Envision Alachua Task Force explained:

With Envision Alachua, you will not be able to use any potable water for anything other than drinking, washing dishes, and taking a shower. When that water goes out into the system, it's going to be treated and it's going to be reclaimed ... All of this stuff is written out in the plan.

Similarly, supporters responded to concerns about wetland destruction and mitigation. Because the plan proposed development over potentially sensitive wetlands in the eastern part of the county, federal and state law mandate that wetland mitigation must be done to allay medial environmental impacts. However, the presence and location of wetlands on Plum Creek's land was a point of conflict surrounding this proposal, as seen in this supporter's summary of the situation:

I also think that even though there would be more wetland impact, the advantages to an urban compact development are worth it because they can reduce so many of the other environmental impacts, energy usage, transportation, et cetera. It's a little silly.

Proponents of the plan also argued that they had adequately addressed concerns about wildlife protections, as Alachua County provides a significant corridor for wildlife migrations between south Florida and north Florida and the southern states. The Envision Alachua proposal built in a protection for the wildlife corridor but received criticism that it was not nearly adequate as both predator and prey species would use the corridor needing more space for protections. A proponent who worked with the corporation explained their approach to the issue:

We're giving 1,000 feet on either side of this wildlife corridor to make sure that we don't disturb that. They will talk about this wildlife corridor and make it sound like we are actually screwing up the major corridor that goes from south Florida all the way up to Georgia. Not doing that.

In essence, Plum Creek utilized a frame of environmental stewardship to claim that they had considered and were going to protect and conserve

the natural environment as much as possible throughout the development process.

Like the discourse about social inequity, these claims were also met with distrust, conflicting information, and disagreements about the interpretation of environmental analyses. Water remained a dominant concern among opponents, and they often framed this discussion around Plum Creek's lack of responsibility and stewardship, as seen in this quote from an environmental activist:

When we reached 600 million gallons of water, we were pumping a day out of the aquifer, the aquifer quit keeping up. We are now pumping over 800 million gallons a day. Our aquifer is in decline and the water management districts have okayed up to 1.2 billion gallons to be pumped. It makes no sense whatsoever ... How can they be doing this [proposing additional development of the land]? I just can't understand!

Similar to suspicions about the legitimacy of Plum Creek's frame of social equity, activists and opponents pointed to the corporation's profit motive as an explanation for why they were not truly dedicated to environmental protection. In the discussion about water and water availability, a respondent heatedly explained:

I don't have the same vision as these people do! Build it, build it, build it! Put it up. How are you going to sustain it? Where's the water gonna come from? But, you know, they see dollars. They see dollars.

Wetland mitigation was a central theme in opponents' responses to Plum Creek's environmental stewardship frame. Wetland mitigation is a highly contested method of alleviating environmental damage associated with development. The corporation claimed the plan appropriately accounted for damage to these areas, but environmentalists argued that this method was not adequate to account for the destruction that would occur if development moved forward, as seen in this illustrative quote:

So, wetland mitigation is the idea that you have a wetland over here and it has a million gallons of water sitting on top of it. And, these guys want to dig a hole over here and fill it up with a million gallons of water and get rid of [the first one] ... but the wetlands are a natural process that has been developed by nature. And now you have a mosquito retention pond. It's not the same thing!

In essence, opponents did not trust any of the environmental claims made by Plum Creek or their supporters. The same theme was seen in the discussion of the proposed allowances for wildlife corridors, as explained by this participant:

[The area is] a host to a lot of animals. And, you know, it's a potential wildlife corridor connecting some really important species that have already been saved. But who knows if there's a huge chunk of land missing? What they're proposing as a "greenway" is very small. It would not be conducive to any kind of corridor or even to wetlands protection.

Opponents' responses to the claims of environmental care and conservation is best summed up by this activist's recollection of an interaction with a Plum Creek representative at a public meeting:

So, we blew holes into their pretty argument of how they care about the land, they're good stewards for the land. [Plum Creek representative] told me in a meeting ... when I asked about the animals and the wildlife, she said: "We account for every bird, bunny, and butterfly." And I said, "Really? How do you do that, when the trucks run them over? Do you pick them up and count them?" They don't count every bunny and butterfly. I mean, come on, that's bullshit.

While this controversy is still ongoing, it was put on hold on March 1, 2016 when the county commission refused to pass the proposal on for consideration to the state capital in a three to two vote. At this time, all Envision Alachua proposal projects are on hold, and it seems that the corporation's best efforts at bolstering its legitimacy in the community and promoting the social equity and environmental stewardship of their proposal were not enough to overcome the considerable distrust and suspicion that environmentalists and other concerned citizens had about the true nature of the corporation's agenda.

## DISCUSSION

Controversies over natural resource management and decision-making such as land use conversions can prove to be divisive and contentious at the community level (Jackson and Pradubraj 2004; Nie 2003; Shriver and Kennedy 2005; Schmitz 2002). What is often missing from analyses of these cases is attention to issues of trust among stakeholder groups, which are important because these dynamics can have significant effects

on the discursive ways that opposing groups interact. We built on previous work that has investigated trust in corporate messaging and corporate framing efforts to ask whether corporate frames may have an inherent disadvantage *because* they are coming from a corporation. In other words, do some local groups in natural resource controversies distrust corporate claims from the outset?

To investigate these dynamics, we focused on a community controversy over a REIT forestland-use conversion project in Alachua County, Florida. The Plum Creek Timber Company proposed a plan called the Envision Alachua plan, which would facilitate the development of several thousand acres in the eastern portion of the county. While the land is currently zoned for rural/agricultural use, the proposal would entail re-zoning the land for light industrial, retail, and residential development. In essence, the proposal promised significant economic growth at the expense of important ecosystem services in the region.

Our analysis revealed that Plum Creek utilized several discursive mechanisms to shape the discourse around the controversial proposal. First, they highlighted the undeniable and persistent social inequity in the county, especially as it pertained to racial and economic segregation between the eastern and western portions of the county. Several stakeholder groups aggressively supported the proposal, and they cited the promise of economic opportunities for the east side of the county, which has historically been characterized by low-income and minority communities. Stakeholders from these areas supported the proposal, as it would provide new and proximate economic opportunities for residents. We found that these corporate moral frames (see Benford 2007; Benford and Snow 2000; Gunter and Kroll-Smith 2007; Selfa 2004) not only resonated with residents who were most affected by these issues, but they were reiterated and reconstructed by supporters of the proposal in venues such as public meetings and in our interviews.

However, our findings also showed that these messages were refuted by opponents on several levels. Opponents of the proposal described reasons why developing the eastern portion of the county would not alleviate social inequity, but more importantly, they pointed to the impossibility that the REIT could be concerned about community well-being or enhancement. Previous research has shown that growing numbers of people in the U.S. are inherently distrustful of corporations (Adams et al. 2010; Bellingham 2003; de Arruda and Rok 2016). Our findings show in particular how this inherent distrust can affect the resonance of corporate official framing efforts in cases of controversy in

the context of natural resource conflicts. In this case, opponents described corporate frames as lies, hidden agendas, and terms associated with lack of trust. Moreover, opponents argued that the corporation was strategically exploiting issues of race and socioeconomic inequity to work for a profit motive. Our findings highlight the importance of attending to issues of trust in powerful corporations in framing analyses. Plum Creek's use of moral framing set the stage to center the argument on *social values* rather than facts. As such, the distrust of a massive corporation was further exacerbated by sensitive race- and inequity-centered discussions.

Our data also showed that much of the discourse surrounding the opposition to the proposal centered on environmental stewardship. While the corporation consistently claimed to have done its due diligence in planning for the preservation of important ecosystem services such as water supply and quality, green space, and wildlife corridors, opponents argued that the Envision Alachua proposal would destroy protected wetlands, jeopardize thousands of acres of high-functioning forested land, and worsen urban sprawl. While participants utilized specific arguments to explain why wetland mitigation was ineffective or why estimates of withdrawals from the Floridan Aquifer were inaccurate, our analysis revealed that the underlying current of opposition to the corporation's environmental claims was rooted in skepticism that any corporation would prioritize environmental health over capital gain, as noted most succinctly by a participant who emphasized that powerful corporations "only see dollars." Scholars have established how facts-based disagreements are often central in conflicts over natural resources (e.g., Wehr 1979). However, we add to this research by showing how underlying issues of preexisting distrust can actually undergird fact-based disagreements, as opponents to corporate framing efforts may be predisposed to skepticism and suspicion.

Our analysis of this case shows that the corporation's use of moral frames in the context of social inequity, and fact-based claims in the context of environmental stewardship, were met with skepticism because of residents' beliefs that values and truth-telling are antithetical to a corporation's implicit drive for profit, even at the cost of ethical responsibilities. In this way, a fundamental lack of trust in powerful corporations caused the frames to fail to resonate, especially among vocal opponents to the plan. Yet, we argue that because the corporation tapped into real and present frustrations regarding social inequity, the frames did resonate with people who prioritized these issues over others. Environmentalists and other opponents to the plan saw the framing of

race-based issues as a strategy to discursively obstruct opposition in the community. Although the framing of the debate was multi-issue and multi-faceted, proponents and opponents disagreed on every point. In this way, our research supports the need for trust-building both in process and in discourse when dealing with complex natural resource controversies. However, attention must focus on inherent distrust of corporate frames and claims in cases where financially powerful companies are at the center of these conflicts. Future land use and environmental decisions are going to involve diverse actors with power imbalances and differences in trust, so it will be critical to address these issues as part of creating discussion surrounding development that is both environmentally and socially just. This research provides insights useful for future work on natural resource controversies as well as corporate efforts to counteract protest and challenge. While previous work has acknowledged the tension between environmental concerns and issues of social justice and economic development, we argue that this case highlights the nuanced nature of social values – including values regarding the role of powerful corporations in society – surrounding environmental and natural resource control, decision-making, and the ripple effects these issues can have for historically marginalized communities.

#### ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> Plum Creek Timber merged with another REIT, Weyerhaeuser, in February 2016. While the corporation now goes by the name Weyerhaeuser, we will refer to the company as Plum Creek in this article, as that was the name that was used for the majority of this controversy.

#### DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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